

CENTENARY HISTORY

of the

Swiss Mennonite Churches

of

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Putnam and Allen
Counties, Ohio

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A Brief History

of the

Swiss Mennonite Churches

of

Putnam and Allen Counties, Ohio



**Written for the Centenary of the Origin
of the Swiss Mennonite Churches
held on July 4, 1937 at
Bluffton, Ohio**

Dedication

This History is dedicated to the Swiss Mennonite churches of Putnam and Allen Counties of the State of Ohio with the belief that it presents a true picture of their origin and development and gives the proper emphasis to the significant contribution they have made to the Mennonite church life of America during a century of progress in the land of religious liberty.

E. J. Hirschler, Centenary Historian

A. S. Hilty
Menno Schumacher
D. J. Basinger } Historical Committee

July 4, 1937

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SWISS MENNONITE CHURCHES OF PUTNAM AND ALLEN COUNTIES, OHIO

The Swiss Mennonites of Putnam and Allen Counties are descendants of the Anabaptists (Taufgesinnten) of Switzerland, in particular those of the Emmenthal of the Bernese Oberland. When Zwingli began the Swiss Reformation in 1520, a number of his more radical associates such as Balthasar Hübmaier, Konrad Grebel and Felix Manz could no longer follow him when he permitted the state to make an alliance with the Reformed church and used the power of the state to enforce the decrees of the church. In 1525 they established independent congregations known as the "Old Evangelic Baptist-minded churches" (Alt Evangelische Taufgesinnten-Gemeinden) gathering about themselves small remnants of the Apostolic Brethren of Waldensian origin which had survived the terrors of the inquisition.

It is from these Swiss Brethren that the Mennonite church is derived. They desired to establish a pure church according to the Apostolic pattern consisting of brethren who had a personal experience of salvation manifesting itself in a righteous Christian life. Admittance to membership was to be on personal confession of faith and baptism and the brotherhood was to be kept pure by a scriptural church discipline. They believed that the church should be completely separated from the world and from the state and refused to bear arms or swear oaths.

The power of the church state of the Swiss cantons was at once used against them. Some of them suffered martyrdom by beheading or drowning, others were sold to the Venetian government as galley slaves, but a large majority were banished from their native land. The churches of the Swiss Brethren in the

cantons of Zürich, Basel and St. Gallen were all but annihilated by these severe persecutions. However, those of the Emmenthal in Canton Bern were never completely destroyed, but during the years 1671-1710 about 500 families were driven into exile. Most of them found a refuge in the Rhenish Palatinate, still others went to Alsace or to Holland. During the years 1710-1760 a large number of the Palatine Mennonites of Swiss descent accepted the invitation of William Penn to settle in Pennsylvania. They were joined by others coming directly from Canton Bern and become the ancestors of most of the earlier American Mennonites.

About the time that the Mennonite immigration to the Palatinate and to Pennsylvania was taking place a considerable group of Emmenthaler Mennonites found a refuge under severe restrictions in the Swiss Jura Mountains of the Bishopric of Basel north and west of Biel. They were not allowed to settle in or near the cities nor to own their own lands. Each family was permitted to rent but a few acres of the rough and stony uplands. To supplement their meagre income from dairying and general farming most of them also plied a trade such as weaving, spinning or cabinet making. They were not allowed to build churches, but met for worship in the various homes or sheds. The largest of the Jura congregations was the Sonnenberg congregation. A number of this same group of Emmenthalers also settled just across the French border in Canton Delle of the Territory of Belfort and in Southern Alsace in the Department du Haut Rhin (High Rhine).

Shortly after the Napoleonic wars the already severe economic condition of the Mennonites of the Jura was aggravated by famine during the years 1816 and 1817. This caused them to think of America where some of their brethren had already found com-

plete economic and religious freedom. During the years 1819-1835 the larger number of the members of the Sonnenberg congregation undertook a long and tedious journey by wagon and ship to the American frontier among the forest of Wayne County, Ohio. Here they established the Sonnenberg congregation near Dalton, Ohio, in the year 1827. Some of them also settled in Holmes County, Ohio, and in Virginia. During the years 1820-1835 a group of French Mennonites from Belfort Territory and Southern Alsace also emigrated to Wayne County and in the year 1825 founded the Chippewa congregation north of Orrville, Ohio. Both of these congregations continued to grow by new arrivals from Switzerland, Alsace and from Holmes County so that soon some of their members were looking for cheaper lands farther west.

In the spring of 1833 Michael Neuenschwander who had come from Fevorait in Canton Delle of Belfort Territory ten years previously and had joined the Chippewa congregation left Wayne county with his three sons Hans, Daniel and Michael and bought some cheap government land in Putnam county, (which then included Richland Township of Allen County) near Riley Creek on the farm now occupied by Harley Marquart. In the fall of the year 1834 Christian Bucher, Christian Suter, John Moser and Ursus Amstutz also arrived from Wayne and Holmes counties and settled near Riley Creek. In the spring of 1835 the brothers John, Christian and Ulrich Bœsiger and John Lugibühl came from Alsace.

The beginning of the original Alsatian Swiss church of Putnam County dates back to the fall of 1835 when the first minister Christian Steiner arrived directly from the Buchwald of Belfort Territory of France which was situated very close to the Swiss border. He was at once chosen as minister and held services in the homes and barns of the various members. Dur-

The "Buchwald", Home of the Steiner Family



The "Buchwald", ancestral home of Elder Christian Steiner, situated in Canton Delle (or Dotried) of Belfort Territory, France. The Steiner family lived here as tenants for seven generations.

Christian Steiner was born in ~~November, 1774~~ He was elder of the Swiss church from its beginning in 1835 until his death on ~~October 9, 1853.~~ *May 30* *Jan. 5, 1846*

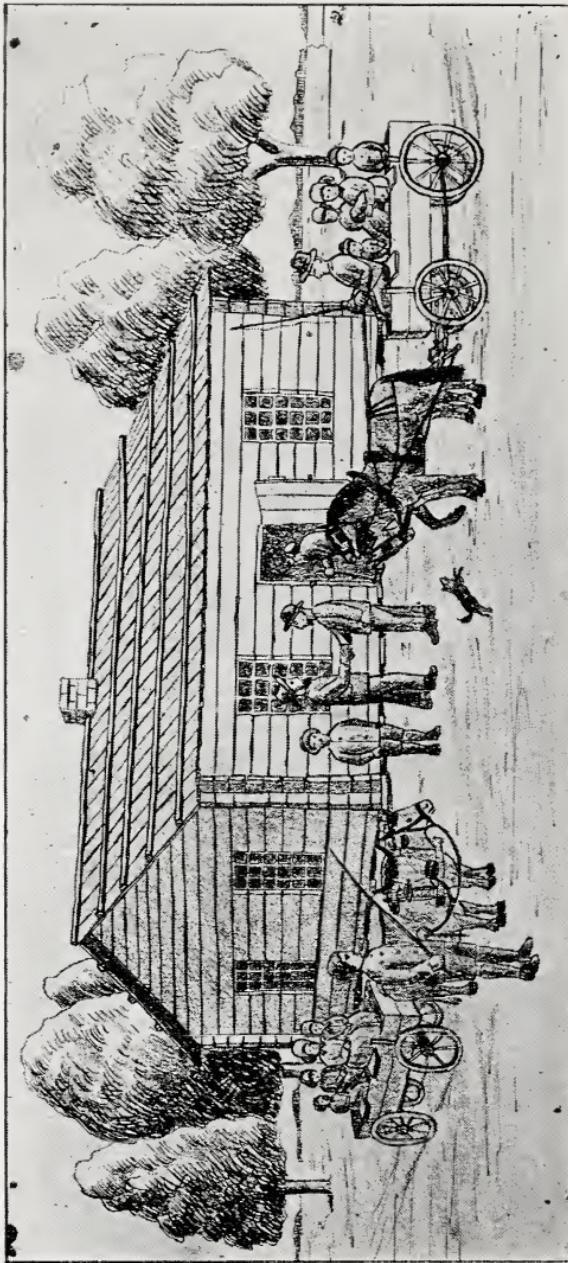
April 27 Ulrich Steiner, son of Elder Christian Steiner, was born ~~January~~, 1816, at Blumberg, Canton Delle (or Dotried), in the Territory of Belfort, France. He came to Putnam County, Ohio, with his father in October, 1835. He was chosen as minister of the Swiss Church in 1838 and as elder several years later. He died on August 7, 1853.

ing the next year the church was increased to twenty families by new arrivals from Wayne and Holmes counties.

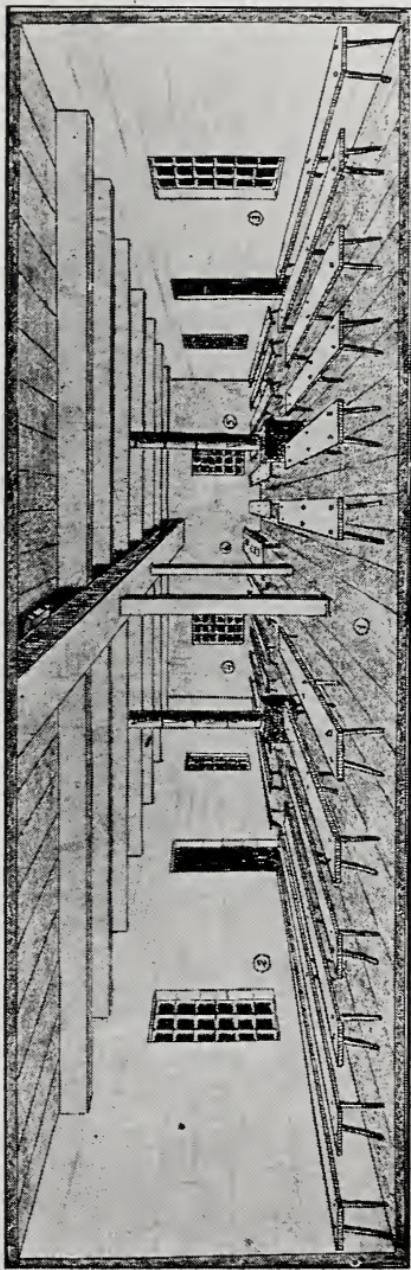
A complete organization of the church was effected in 1837 when Christian Bœsiger (Basinger) was elected as deacon and Christian Suter was chosen as minister to assist the elder Christian Steiner. As Father Steiner was already well along in years his son Ulrich was also made a minister a year later and John C. Lugibühl was chosen as a second deacon. During the early forties another minister, John M. Amstutz arrived directly from Switzerland.

Since the congregation was rapidly increasing by new accessions from Wayne and Holmes counties and also directly from Switzerland and Alsace a church was built of hewn logs on the farm of Daniel Neuenschwander, son of the first settler, during the year 1840. This farm was situated about a mile north of Michael Neuenschwander's log cabin and is now occupied by David Niswander. It was soon after this that a second elder was chosen at the request of Elder Steiner. The lot having fallen on the minister Ulrich Steiner he was ordained as elder by Daniel Steiner, elder of the Chippewa church in Wayne county. On January 5, 1846 Father Christian Steiner was called to his reward after having served as elder of the church for eleven years. During the same year John Thut, who had been an elder in the American Mennonite church of Holmes county, arrived and also preached for the congregation. He wished to introduce footwashing at the next communion service, but as this was not agreeable to the other ministers, he organized an independent church with his followers. This church was usually called the Thut congregation but later was officially named the Zion church and was affiliated with the Old Mennonite churches. In the year 1857 a meeting house was built by this group

*Mrs. C. R. Steiner, a daughter of
Bish. John Thut, stated the
Zion Church was organized in
1849. Paul E. Whitmer*



The first meeting house of the Swiss church. Built from hewn logs on the farm of Daniel Neuenschwander in 1840.
(Taken from P. B. Amstutz's "Geschichtliche Ereignisse der Mennoniten Ansiedlung.")



Interior view of the First Log Cabin Church of 1840.

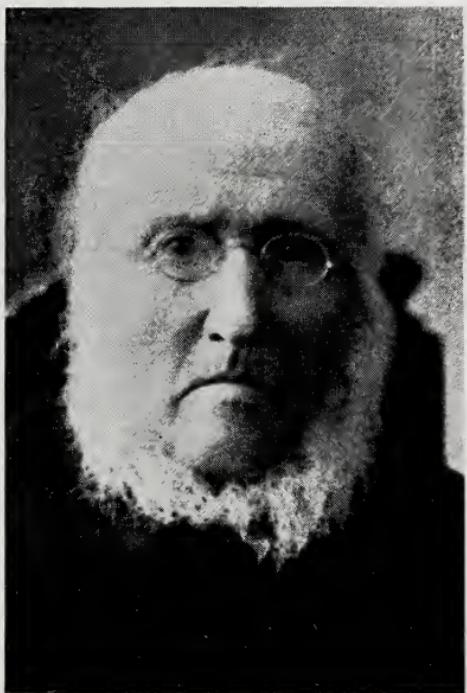
1. Place for ministers;
2. Place for men;
3. Place for women;
4. Table for singers;
5. Place for young women;
6. Place for young men;
7. Bible on the beam.
(According to P. B. Amstutz in "Geschichtliche Ereignisse der Mennoniten Ansiedlung.")

about four miles west of Bluffton.

To give adequate facilities for worship to all members of the original Swiss congregation a frame church was built in the year 1846 just across the road west of the present site of the Ebenezer church on the farm then occupied by Christian Lugibühl, so that the brethren now possessed two houses for worship. Thereafter services were held alternately on Sunday mornings in the two churches. These services usually lasted for about two hours and consisted of the singing of psalms, the reading of the Scriptures and prayers besides an exhortation or sermon of an hour or more in length by one of the ministers. The ministers were chosen by lot from among the brethren and received no compensation for their services. A strict church discipline was maintained by the elders and differences arising between members were adjusted by the ministers, as it was contrary to the regulations to appeal to the civil law or to hold offices in the civil government. In general the settlers, like their forefathers before them, were a sober, Godfearing, industrious, frugal and peaceloving people. They lived simply and dressed plainly. By dint of hard manual labor they cleared the forests and transformed them into fruitful farms, so that the Swiss Settlement soon became known as one of the finest agricultural sections of Northwestern Ohio.

Elder Ulrich Steiner died of typhoid fever on August 7, 1853. This was in the year of the great epidemic of typhoid fever when more than thirty members of the church succumbed to this dread disease. On October 9 of the same year, two additional ministers were chosen by lot, namely John Moser, who had come from the Sonnenberg Church of Wayne county the previous year, and Christian Steiner (not a son of Elder Steiner). On the same date Christian Suter who had already served as minister for 16 years

JOHN MOSER

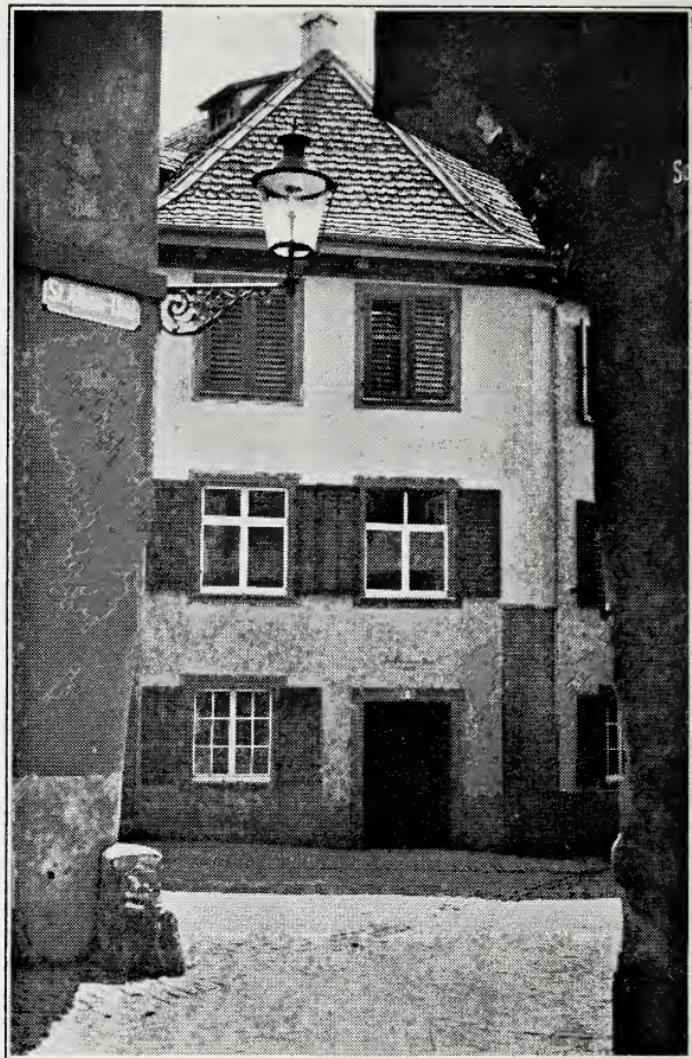


Born Wayne County, Ohio, August 2, 1828

Died July 10, 1908.

Minister Swiss church, 1853-1908.

Elder Swiss church, 1864-1903



Home of the Schumacher family in Basel, Switzerland.

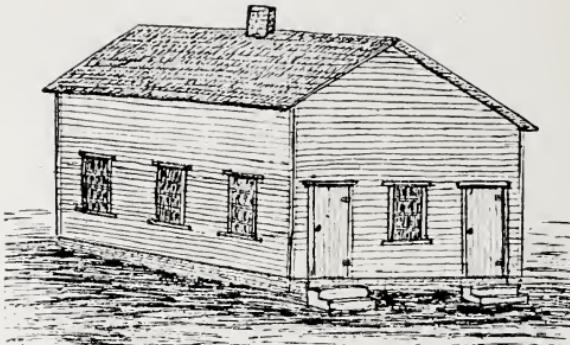
Peter Schumacher was born in Basel, Switzerland, on March 6, 1819, and came to Putnam County with his father Christian Schumacher in 1836. He was ordained as a minister of the Swiss church on May 11, 1856 and served until his death on May 28, 1881.

was ordained as elder. The ordinations were all conducted by the elders Peter Schneck and Ulrich Sommer of the Sonnenberg church. The newly ordained Christian Steiner only served the church about nine weeks when he too passed away. On May 11, 1856 another election for minister was held resulting in the choice of Peter Schumacher who had come here with his father Christian Schumacher from Basel, Switzerland during the year 1836. Elder Christian Suter ordained him as minister of the congregation. He holds the distinction of being the progenitor of a larger number of descendants than any of the other pioneers.

As the congregation was rapidly outgrowing the capacity of the original log cabin church it was torn down in 1857 and a larger frame church was built on the same site. This building was familiarly known as the Old White church and was enlarged in 1876 to make room for the growing congregation. It served the northern part of the congregation for many years.

At the request of Elder Christian Suter a second elder was selected from among the remaining ministers on January 24, 1864. The lot fell on John Moser, who had already served as minister for eleven years and now began a long and successful career as elder. During the year 1868 a new brick church was built across the road from the church on Christian Lugibühl's land and later became known as the Ebenezer church. In 1883 this church was enlarged and in 1928 it was still further enlarged and modernized.

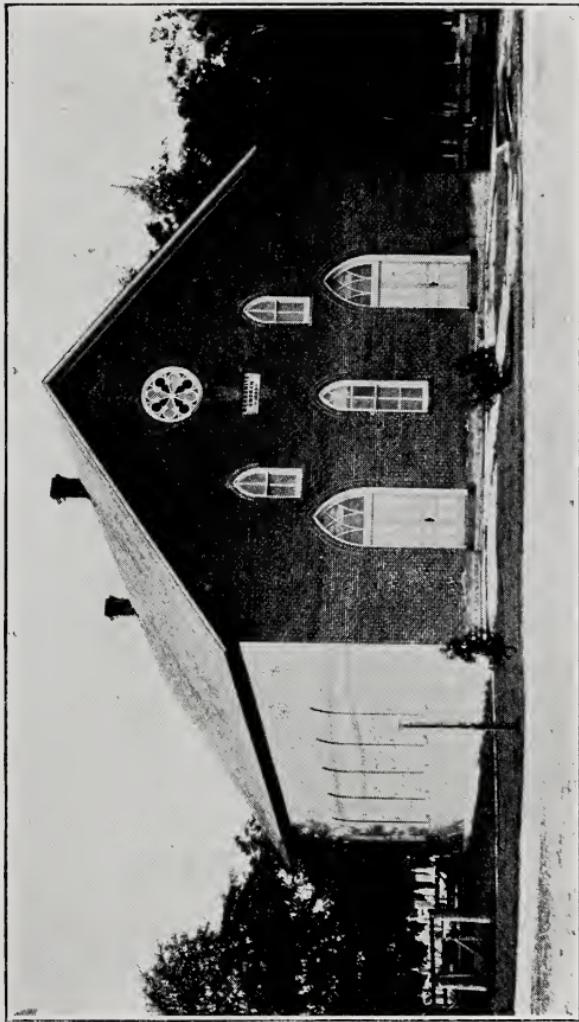
As the organization of the church was entirely democratic and independent of any outside ecclesiastical control it was but natural that differences of opinion which arose concerning such matters as church discipline, plain dress and more evangelistic



The first "Old White Church". Built in 1857 on the site of the Log Cabin Church of 1840. Drawn by D. C. Bixel according to the memory of Aaron Geiger and other older members who worshipped in this church.



The Rebuilt and Enlarged "Old White Church" of 1876. Built on the same site as the log cabin church of 1840 and of the first Old White Church of 1857. Drawn according to the memory of older settlers by D. C. Bixel.



The enlarged Ebenezer church of 1883. This church was used until 1928.

methods of church work would in some cases lead to the organization of new churches independent of the parent church. Moreover divisions in Mennonite churches of other communities exerted their influence here also. The first of these new churches was the Zion church already mentioned.

About the year 1844 the Reformed Mennonite church which had been founded by Rev. John Herr of Pennsylvania in 1811 as a reformation of the Old Mennonite church in the direction of greater conservatism in dress, church discipline and refusal to fellowship with other denominations first found entrance in this community when under the influence of Christian Rupp, an American Mennonite who had at one time joined the Swiss church, several families became followers of Herr. However, it seems that the local Reformed Mennonite church was not organized until about the year 1868. In 1876 the present church was built about three miles northwest of Bluffton. David P. Basinger was ordained as elder in 1882 and continued to serve as such for many years.

About the year 1864 Henry Egli, a preacher of the Old Order Amish church at Berne, Indiana, left that church because he believed in a greater emphasis on individual conversion and organized the Defenseless Mennonite church about 1866. At the invitation of Rev. Abraham Steiner, then a minister in the Zion church west of Bluffton, Rev. Egli visited members of the Zion church in 1884 and held protracted meetings in various school houses of the Settlement. A number of members of the Zion church followed Rev. Abraham Steiner in the organization of the Bluffton Defenseless Mennonite church which was popularly known as the Egli church. In 1886 the present house of worship west of Bluffton was erected.

Shortly after the death of deacon John C. Lugibühl



PETER P. STEINER

Deacon Swiss Church
1874-1904

Deacon Grace Church
1904-1918

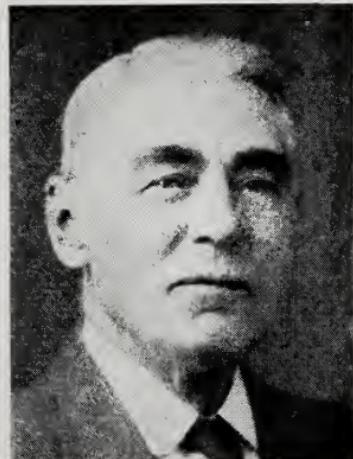


CHRISTIAN ZIMMERLY

Minister Swiss Church
1876-1900

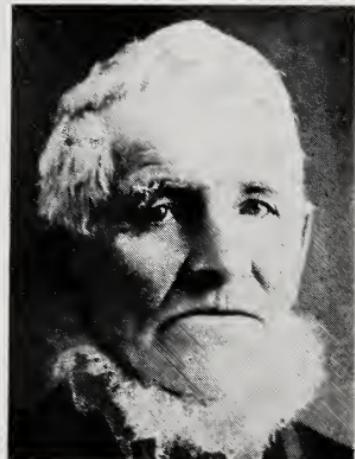
Elder Swiss Church
1887-1900

Elder of Independent Swiss
Church 1900-1916



BENJAMIN DILLER

Minister Swiss Church
1881-1919



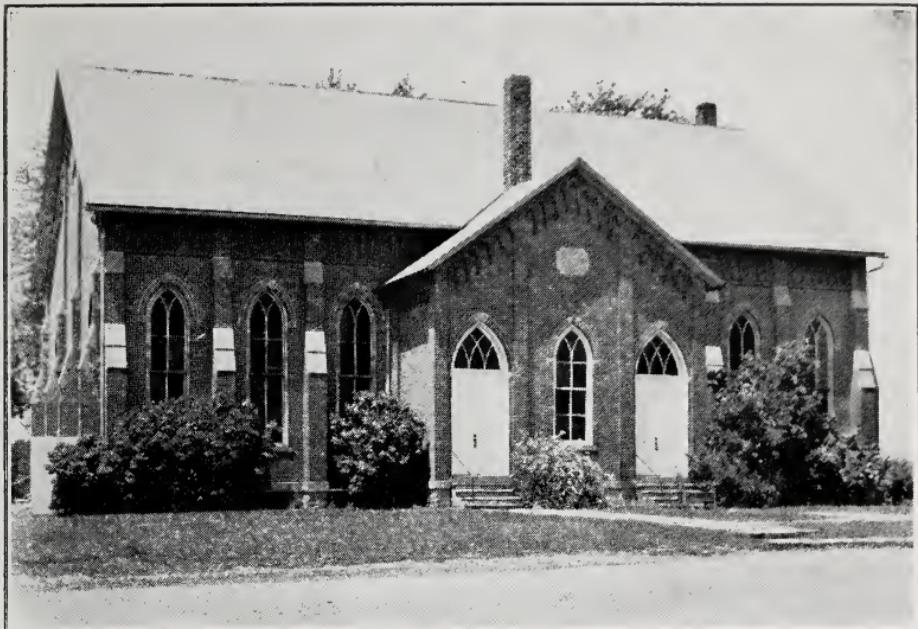
FRIEDERICH ZELLER

Minister Swiss Church
1891-1903

in 1873 another deacon was elected by the Swiss church on May 31, 1874. The person chosen was Peter P. Steiner, a grandson of the first elder. On December 3, 1874, Christian Suter who had faithfully served as minister for 37 years and as elder for 21 years was called to his eternal reward. Several years later another minister was added in the person of Christian Zimmerly.

At first the congregation had stood rather aloof from the main current of American protestantism, but as the years went by and some of the younger men came into contact with the business, school and religious life about them certain innovations gradually found entrance. One of the first of these was the Sunday School. From information for which we are indebted to Brother Noah Moser, the first Sunday School was started by Abraham Zurflüh, then a school teacher at the southern church on Christian Lugi-bühl's land (sometimes called the Bucher church and used also as a school house) during the later sixties. This school convened only during the summer months. About the year 1874 George Moser, a Mennonite from Haysville in Ashland county, then teaching at the Beech Tree school house, organized a Sunday School at the school house which was attended mostly by children. However, in the year 1877 a Sunday School was begun in the Old White Church which was more generally patronized by the older and younger members of the congregation alike. A year later another Sunday School was organized at the Ebenezer church.

In 1885 the younger Sunday School workers who had been in touch with Sunday School leaders of other Swiss Mennonite churches at Berne, Indiana, and at Dalton, Ohio, called a Sunday School convention for the Swiss churches which was held in the Old White Church on Oct. 16 and 17. The next year a similar convention was held at Berne to which all churches



St. John Church, near Pandora, 1889.



D. J. UNRUH,
Pastor St. John Church
November 1936—

of the Middle District were invited. Later these conventions become known as the conventions of the Middle District.

As the faithful minister Peter Schumacher died a sudden death in 1881 while on his way home from Ottawa, Benjamin Diller was chosen as his successor several months later. During the year 1887 the minister Christian Zimmerly was chosen to the office of elder, so that the congregation again possessed two elders.

At this time the church had grown to over 500 members, since there were constantly new arrivals from Switzerland and Wayne county in addition to the natural increase of the Settlement. Therefore it was decided to build a large brick church about two miles north of the Old White church. This edifice was completed in 1889 and is known as the St. John church. Though the congregation at this time was not affiliated with any conference it was decided to invite the Middle District Conference to hold its sessions in the new church. However, there had been some contacts with other Mennonite churches of Ohio and neighboring states for a number of years. After the General Conference of the Mennonite Church of North America was organized in 1860 some of its leaders had visited the Swiss church and succeeded in interesting the more progressive members in foreign missions and in Christian Education. As a result several young men of the church attended the Mennonite Seminary which was in session at Wadsworth, Ohio, during the years 1868-1878 and contributions to missions and education were occasionally made. When the General Conference began to publish the Bundesbote in 1882 a good many members became regular subscribers and a church correspondent was appointed, who contributed frequently to its columns. Also a number of other writers including

Rev. John Moser wrote brief articles for its columns. This explains the fact that the Middle District Conference was invited to hold its sessions here in 1889 before the church joined the conference.

Before the conference was held the St. John church was dedicated on October 6, at which time Rev. David Goerz of Kansas delivered a masterful dedication sermon and Rev. S. F. Sprunger of Berne, Indiana, formally dedicated the church. During the following week the conference and a Sunday School Convention were held in the presence of a large number of conference visitors. At this session the value of conference work was so clearly presented by Rev. Sprunger that the desire to join actively in this work became stronger in the local church.

Before the year 1893 the organization of the church was rather informal and the only officers were the pastors and deacons. No regular congregational meetings were held nor their proceedings recorded. Elder Christian Suter had begun a church record in 1853 in which the election of elders, ministers and deacons, names of church members, baptisms, marriages, deaths and matters relating to church discipline were recorded. This record was continued by Elder John Moser until about 1886, but it is not always complete.

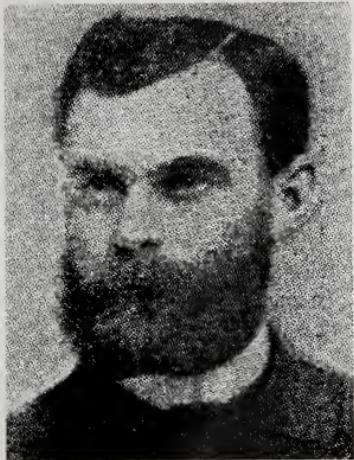
However, on January 2, 1893 a constitution was proposed by Father Moser and adopted by the congregation. This provided for a more formal organization. Three trustees were elected to assist deacon P. P. Steiner in taking care of the business of the church. The first trustees chosen were C. P. Schumacher, Peter Bixel, Jr. and A. M. Amstutz. Further, Abraham Zurflüh was elected as the first secretary of the congregation and a new church record was begun in which the minutes of congregational meetings were recorded in some detail.

The desire for a more active participation in con-

ference work found expression during the year 1893. Three years previously the General Conference in session at Childstown, South Dakota, decided to convene at the St. John church at its next session in 1893. Before the conference visitors arrived it was decided to take a vote on the question of joining that body. This was done on October 2, 1893 at a meeting held in the Ebenezer church. Though some were opposed and others refrained from voting, yet the great majority voted in favor of joining the conference. It was on October 19-26 of the same year that the General Conference held its sessions in the St. John church, followed by a two-day Sunday School Convention. The church was admitted to the conference and supported its publications and missionary and educational enterprises more liberally.

New additions were made to the ministry during the nineties. In 1891 Friedrich Zeller of Mt. Cory, Ohio, transferred his membership from the Evangelical Church to the local Swiss church and was called to assist in the work of preaching. During the year 1894 the itinerant minister (Reiseprediger) of General Conference, Rev. J. B. Baer moved to Bluffton and preached for the brethren occasionally while continuing his traveling ministry, but during the year 1900 he was elected as a minister of this congregation.

In 1890 there was a division in most of the Defenseless Mennonite churches of Ohio and Indiana because some of the ministers and members adopted immersion as the only mode of baptism and stressed Divine Healing and other newer ideas. Some of the members of the local Defenseless church held meetings in the homes of those adhering to the newer doctrines. Later the meetings were held in the old Public School building of Pandora until the present Missionary church of Pandora was purchased. Eventually this group became known as the Missionary



J. B. BAER
Minister Swiss Church
1900-1909
Elder Swiss Church
1903-1909



CHRISTIAN HEGE
Minister Swiss Church
1904-1909

church.

Though most of the members of the church remained a rural people an increasing number settled in the towns of Pandora and Bluffton where many of them became prominent in business. This led to a desire for services in the towns as well as in the country. In 1895 a third Sunday School was begun at Bluffton and regular services were held every second Sunday evening. The meetings were at first held in the Lutheran church, later in the Steiner Block on Main street until the present First Mennonite church was erected and dedicated. In the fall of 1900 the Swiss church was again host to the Middle District Conference, which was held in the First Mennonite church at Bluffton.

The educational interest of the church was on the increase ever since the days of the Mennonite Sem-

inary at Wadsworth. However, that institution closed its doors in 1878. As early as 1885 there appeared a brief article in the Bundesbote by a contributor from the Swiss church calling attention to the need of a Mennonite College and suggesting that Bluffton would be a strategic location for such an institution. When Bethel College opened its doors in 1893 it received financial support from this community and several students as well as a faculty member were furnished by this church.

A few years later the Middle District Conference proposed to establish a college of its own. The Swiss church at once issued an invitation to have the school located at Bluffton and several of its members were on the conference committee that finally accepted this invitation in 1898. The church contributed liberally to the building and current expense funds of the school, and on June 19, 1900, it was Father Moser who laid the corner stone of Central Mennonite College in the presence of a vast throng of people. Since then the history of the college has been closely interwoven with the history of the Swiss church. The college has continued to receive a large measure of support from the Swiss churches and many of their young people have enrolled as students. At first the college was only an Academy with the addition of a music department and a business department, but gradually it expanded its curriculum until it became a Junior College. In 1914 Central Mennonite College was transformed into a cooperative enterprise under the control of several branches of Mennonites and authorized to offer a standard four year college course leading to the degree Bachelor of Arts. Since then more than a hundred sons and daughters of the Swiss churches have received the A. B. degree from Bluffton College and have rendered a large service to their respective congregations as officers and teachers in



Taken during the last years before the separate organization
of the four branch churches.

The men pictured are (left to right): Christian Steiner, Rev.
J. B. Baer, Elder John Moser, Deacon P. P. Steiner, Prof.
P. D. Amstutz, Missionary R. M. Petter.

their Sunday Schools, as leaders in Young People's work and as choristers, organists, pianists and members of church choirs. Some of them have entered the ministry or gone to the foreign field as missionaries. A very large number have become active as teachers in high schools, grade schools or colleges. Others have engaged in business, in agriculture and in the profession of medicine. The faculty of the college have also made valuable contributions to the work of the church and the conferences. Mennonite Seminary was organized as a part of the college in 1914 but was reorganized as an independent institution in 1921 and named Witmarsum Theological Seminary. The Seminary rendered a great service to the Mennonite church in training ministers, missionaries and religious workers for the churches. Some of these have served the local Swiss churches as pastors. It was discontinued in 1931.

During the years following 1900 the demand for more frequent services in the outlying parts of the Settlement grew more insistent. The group in Bluffton desired services every Sunday and in 1901 proposed that a church be erected in Bluffton. The St. John's group also repeatedly requested that services be held in the St. John church every Sunday morning. There were some who proposed that services be held in Pandora and in the western part of the Settlement, just as they were being held in Bluffton. This raised the question as to how to secure young recruits for the ministry and there was considerable discussion concerning what constitutes the biblical method of calling men into the ministry. Finally in 1903 Albert Schumacher and Peter P. Hilty, two young men then studying at Central Mennonite College, were chosen as evangelists and requested to prepare themselves for the ministry while continuing their studies.

Early in the same year Elder John Moser wished to be excused from his arduous duties as elder because of the infirmities of age, though he declared his willingness to continue preaching as far as his strength permitted. He had already served the congregation as minister for 50 years and as elder for 39 years. His request was granted and Rev. J. B. Baer was chosen as his successor. During the year the fiftieth anniversary of his entrance into the ministry was fittingly celebrated.

However, the problem of providing regular services for all parts of the Settlement was not yet solved. Also there was a petition from the northern part of the congregation for a measure of local jurisdiction in church government just as the three Sunday Schools were each managing their own affairs. Besides this, decided differences of opinion were developing on certain matters relating to church govern-

ment and discipline which proved very difficult of adjustment and led to much dissension. As a consequence a number of groups formed independent churches during the early years of the new century.

The largest group which organized its own church at this time was the Grace Church of Pandora. Rev. S. F. Sprunger assisted in the organization of the new congregation which was completed in April 1904. Peter P. Steiner, Peter B. Hilty and Christian P. Schumacher were elected as deacons and Albert Schütz, Philip Neuenschwander and Peter A. Amstutz were chosen as trustees. The services were temporarily held in the Methodist Episcopal Church of Pandora, but it was soon decided to build a new church. The building of the Grace Church was begun in July of the same year and completed during the following winter. On Feb. 26, 1905 the church was dedicated by the pastor A. R. Schormann. Rev. S. F. Sprunger preached the German dedicatory sermon while President N. C. Hirschy of Central Mennonite College preached the English dedicatory sermon. At the evening service Rev. Schormann was ordained as pastor of the church by Rev. A. S. Shelly of Pennsylvania and the pastor preached his acceptance sermon. The Grace church was admitted to the Middle District Conference during the fall of the same year and joined the General Conference at its next regular session in 1905.

During the fall of 1903 a smaller group of Bluffton residents who desired regular Sunday morning services for themselves and the college students organized the Bluffton Mennonite Church which met for worship at the Lutheran Church and later at the College Chapel. This congregation also affiliated with the Middle District and General Conferences. However it was disbanded in 1909 and most of its members joined the mother church.



Grace Church of Pandora, 1905.

REV. P. E. WHITMER

Pastor Grace Church

February 1929—*44*



It was during the year 1900 that another small group followed elder Christian Zimmerly in the establishment of an independent congregation which met for worship at the Church of Christ in Pandora. Rev. Zimmerly died in 1916 and Jacob Haas was chosen as his successor. In the year 1925 this organization was given up and its members joined the St. John church or other branches of the Swiss church. After 1904 a small group of members belonging to the parent Swiss church also joined the Missionary Church of Pandora.

Besides the groups mentioned quite a few individuals, especially some of those residing in Bluffton and Pandora have transferred their membership to the churches of other denominations. Such transfers were especially numerous in the days before the church provided for services in the towns. In some cases members left the Mennonite church because they married members of other denominations, which was contrary to the laws of the congregation, or because they found other church regulations too restrictive. Thus all the churches of the towns surrounding the Swiss Settlement have many members which are of Mennonite descent.

That the Swiss Church was gradually changing its method for the selection of ministers is shown by the fact that in the year 1904 Rev. Christian Hege was called from Nebraska to assist the elder in the pastoral work and offered a regular salary.

During the year 1905 the congregation decided to build a modern and commodious house of worship in the town of Bluffton. The new church was built of pressed brick and equipped with class rooms for Sunday School work. It was completed in the spring of 1906 and at the time was considered to be one of the finest Mennonite churches ever built. It was called the First Mennonite Church of Bluffton. On



First Mennonite Church, 1906.

REV. H. T. UNRUH
Pastor First Mennonite Church
January 1936—



April 1, 1906 this new house of worship was solemnly dedicated by the elder Rev. J. B. Baer. Rev. H. J. Krehbiel of Trenton, Ohio, and Prof. Nuelsen of Berea, Ohio, preached the sermons at the dedicatory services.

A few years later, in the year 1908, the aged Rev. John Moser who had served the church so faithfully for over fifty years was called to his eternal reward. During the following year 1909 Rev. J. B. Baer resigned as elder of the congregation and found a new field of labor at Aberdeen, Idaho.

A few months later the remaining full-time minister Rev. Christian Hege also resigned and left for Henderson, Nebraska. These removals left the congregation without an elder or a pastor, since the aged Benjamin Diller had already retired from active service several years before, though he was willing to preach occasionally when the corps of ministers was not adequate.

For this reason a call was given to Rev. W. S. Gottshall of Pennsylvania to become the pastor of the Swiss Church. He began his pastorate on Nov. 5, 1909 and ably directed the work of the church for some years to come. During the year 1908 the congregation had instructed its delegates to the General Conference to invite the Conference to hold its next session in the First Mennonite Church. This session was held in 1911 and again proved to be an inspiration for the whole Swiss church.

The need for additions to the ministry again became urgent after 1911 as the task of caring adequately for a large congregation with three churches was too arduous even for an energetic and indefatigable worker such as Rev. Gottshall. In the year of 1914 a young man of the congregation, Elmer Basinger, was chosen as an assistant pastor while continuing his studies at the same time. After re-



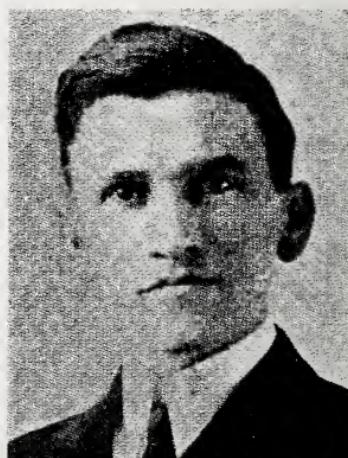
W. S. GOTTSCHALL
Pastor Swiss Church
1909-1923
Pastor Ebenezer Church
1923-1924



ELMER BASINGER
Assistant Pastor Swiss
Church
1914-1918
Pastor First Mennonite
Church
March-August 1918



D. D. KING
Assistant Pastor Swiss
Church
1918-1921



E. J. NEUENSCHWANDER
Pastor Ebenezer Church
1924-1929

ceiving his A. B. degree from Bluffton College in 1915 he served practically on full time for several years. In 1916 the Swiss Church was again privileged to entertain the Middle District Conference at the First Church of Bluffton.

During the year 1917 the desire for a separate organization with a pastor devoting his full time to the Bluffton field was repeatedly expressed at meetings of the Bluffton group. Heretofore it had been possible for the church to provide for regular services at the First Church of Bluffton only on Sunday evenings, even though this church was the church home of the Mennonite students attending the College and Seminary at Bluffton. A separate organization of the First Mennonite Church was authorized by the mother church at the annual meeting held on Jan. 7, 1918. The new organization was completed on Feb. 10, 1918 when a constitution was adopted and officers were elected. The deacons chosen were Amos C. Geiger, E. J. Hirschler and Noah Moser. The first trustees were Peter C. Herr, Louis Gratz and D. W. Bixler. Steps were taken to secure a pastor, for Rev. Gottshall now devoted his whole time to the parent church which now consisted of the members who worshipped at the two country churches. The First Mennonite Church was admitted to the Middle District Conference in 1918 and to the General Conference at its next session held in 1920.

During the year 1918 Rev. David D. King, a son of this congregation who had been ordained here in 1905 and then served the Bethel Church at Fortuna, Missouri for thirteen years was called to assist Rev. Gottshall in the Swiss Church, then consisting of the Ebenezer and St. John groups. However, Rev. King was called to the state of Washington in 1921.

As both the Ebenezer and St. John groups now desired regular services every Sunday morning the



P. P. HILTY
Pastor Grace Church
1904



ALBERT SCHUMACHER
Pastor Grace Church
1908-1917



J. F. MOYER
Pastor Grace Church
1917-1920



J. M. REGIER
Pastor Grace Church
1920-1928

mother church authorized a division into two independent churches during the early part of 1923. Rev. Gottshall continued to act as pastor of the Ebenezer church which completed its separate organization on Feb. 5, 1923 with the election of Amos Neuen-schwander, Philip Hilty and C. W. Roethlisberger as deacons and of D. H. Burkholder, Eli Bixel and S. S. Bixel as trustees.

The St. John Church was organized on Feb. 12, 1923 and selected John Schneck, Amos Hilty and E. D. Kohli as its first deacons while A. C. Diller, C. C. Steiner and Menno Schumacher served as the first trustees. The St. John Church was admitted to the Middle District Conference and also to the General Conference in the fall of the same year.

Thus the main body of the Swiss Church was now organized into four separate branches each served by a pastor who devoted his full time to the work of caring for its spiritual needs.

The four churches have been in charge of the following pastors since the time of their separate organization:

The Grace Church was temporarily served by P. P. Hilty and others during the year 1904 until a permanent pastor could be secured. The terms of service of its pastors have been as follows:

A. R. Schormann from January 1905 to March 1906.
Missionary P. W. Penner of India for some months
during the spring and summer of 1906.

Otto Lichti from August 1906 to September 1908.

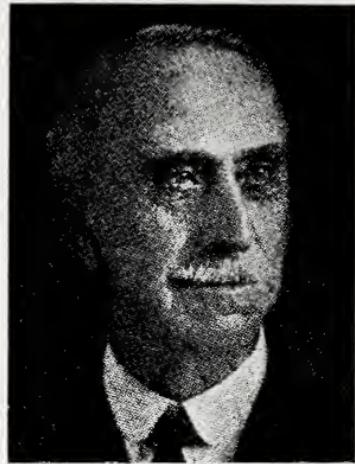
Albert Schumacher from October 1908 to August 1917.

J. F. Moyer from September 1917 to September 1920.

J. M. Regier from September 1920 to December 1928.

P. E. Whitmer from February 1929 to the present time.

The First Mennonite Church of Bluffton has been in charge of the following pastors since its organiza-



A. S. SHELLY
Pastor First Mennonite
Church
1918-1920



S. M. MUSSelman
Pastor First Mennonite
Church
1920-1931



A. E. KREIDER
Pastor First Mennonite
Church
1931-1935

tion in 1918:

Elmer Basinger was engaged as temporary pastor from March 1918 to August 1918 until the permanent pastor could arrive. He completed the church record during his pastorate.

Rev. A. S. Shelly arrived as the first regular pastor in September 1918 and served until August 1920. The succeeding pastors have been: S. M. Musselman from August 1920 until August 1931.

A. E. Kreider from August 1931 to May 1935.

H. T. Unruh since January 1936.

For the first few months after February 1923 the pulpit of the St. John Church was supplied by students of Witmarsum Theological Seminary. Beginning with June 1923 a call was issued to one of these students, A. S. Rosenberger, who served the congregation as pastor until March 1930.

Missionary John Thiessen of India preached from May 1930 until August 1930.

Edgar E. Toeves was pastor from January 1931 to August 1936.

D. J. Unruh from November 1936 until the present time.

The Ebenezer church was served by W. S. Gottshall until August 1924.

The succeeding pastors have been:

E. J. Neuenschwander from August 1924 until January 1929.

P. A. Kliewer since September 1929.

The Ebenezer Church was enlarged and modernized and the exterior was stuccoed in 1928. The church was solemnly rededicated to the worship of God on November 4, 1928 by the pastor Rev. E. J. Neuenschwander. Rev. W. S. Gottshall, the former pastor, preached the dedicatory sermon. At the evening session the pastors of the other three churches also preached short sermons on the subject: "Love to



A. S. ROSENBERGER
Pastor St. John Church
1923-1930



JOHN THIESSEN
Pastor St. John Church
1930



EDGAR E. TOEVS
Pastor St. John Church
1931-1936

God's House."

Early in 1925 the Zion Church west of Bluffton which belonged to the Old Mennonite Conference was discontinued and its members joined the First Mennonite Church or other branches of the Swiss church.

The separate organizations of the four General Conference churches each under the direction of a pastor devoting his full time to the pastoral work has made it possible for each group to cultivate its own field more intensively and in accordance with its own special needs. All of them have been able to offer a complete program of church services and activities and have gradually perfected their organization. Sunday schools have been graded and departmentalized; Endeavor societies and Missionary societies have been grouped into three or four divisions adapted to different age groups. The interest in Christian Missions and Christian Education has been increasing and the offerings for these worthy causes have amounted to large sums in the aggregate. In 1890 the Swiss churches founded the Mennonite Hospital at Bluffton which was later transformed into a Community Hospital. Because of the native interest of the Swiss people in music and under the stimulus of a fine Department of Music at Bluffton College which has given musical training to many of the Swiss young people, church music has developed to a high degree. Not only do the churches provide for good music at the regular Sunday services but the choirs frequently render oratorios or cantatas or give other special musical programs. Each church has endeavored to provide yearly series of special meetings of a devotional or evangelistic nature to stimulate the spiritual life of its members. They have cooperated increasingly with each other in Union Sunday School Conventions or meetings of Ladies Missionary Societies and also with the community in



Enlarged and Modernized Ebenezer Church, 1928.

P. A. KLIEWER
Pastor Ebenezer Church
September 1929—



Union meetings of various kinds. They have taken part in District, County and State Sunday School Conventions, Endeavor Conventions and meetings of councils of churches. They have cooperated with other denominations in the establishment of community systems of Week Day Religious Education and Vacation Bible Schools.

Numerically there has been a considerable increase since the separate organization of the churches. At present the total membership numbers about 1636, distributed as follows: Ebenezer, 535; Grace, 384; St. John, 280; First, 437. This constitutes almost a third of the total membership of the Middle District Conference, while the other Swiss churches of the Conference: Salem at Dalton, Ohio, First Mennonite at Berne, Indiana, and Bethel at Fortuna, Missouri, all of which have had the same origin as the local church, account for very nearly another third of the Conference.

The contributions made to Conference activities has been significant. The churches have entertained the Middle District Conference a number of times since their separate existence. This has given the Swiss community the opportunity of having the Conference in its midst more frequently and thus enabled it to become better acquainted with the conference work. The Grace Church entertained a special session of the Middle District Conference in March 1906 and the regular sessions in the fall of 1919 and again in 1934. The Ebenezer Church was host to the District Conference in 1926 and the St. John Church in 1929. The All-Mennonite Convention was held at the First Church of Bluffton in 1919, the entertainment being provided jointly by the Ebenezer and First Mennonite churches. All four churches united in entertaining the General Conference at the First Church in 1933. This conference was notable for an out door rendition

on the College Campus of Gaul's "Holy City" before an audience estimated at 3500 people by a joint choir of the four churches assisted by other Mennonite churches and the community. The choir consisted of about 250 singers and was directed by Prof. Russell A. Lantz of the College. An orchestra of about fifty accompanied the chorus.

The following brethren have represented these churches as officers or members of standing boards or committees of the General Conference: J. B. Baer, P. P. Steiner, S. K. Mosiman, J. H. Langenwalter, E. J. Hirschler, P. D. Amstutz, J. R. Thierstein, D. D. King, A. S. Shelly, P. E. Whitmer, J. M. Regier, W. S. Gottshall, S. M. Musselman, A. S. Rosenberger, E. J. Neuenschwander, Edgar Toebs and D. J. Unruh. Nearly all of the above have also been active in the Middle District Conference in official capacities. In addition the following have also been officers or members of committees or trustees of Bluffton College representing the Middle District: A. E. Kreider, Noah Moser, N. E. Byers, J. S. Schultz, P. C. Suter, J. A. Amstutz, D. W. Bixler, D. J. Basinger, P. A. Kliewer, John Tosh. It will be noted that former pastors or former teachers of Bluffton College in the above lists have since transferred their membership to other churches.

The various branches of the Swiss church have not only given large contributions to Missions but have furnished workers for the foreign and home fields, some of which have united with other denominations or have been sent out by other boards than those of the General Conference. Among those that may be mentioned are the following: Ezra B. Steiner, Mrs. Ezra B. Steiner, Jennie Gottshall Boehr, Walter Schütz, Lester Bixel, Adah Good Wenger, Hannah Bracy, Christian P. Althaus, Mary Haas, Irma Schneck, Homer Moser, Nettie Moser Martin, Cassie Nis-

wander, Mrs. J. J. Plenert, A. D. Welty, Lulu Sommers, Lillian Welty (Sneff), Susan Bixel Smith, Fanny Baumgartner, Judith Lehman, Katie Moser, Katherine Kliewer Larsen, ~~Dora~~ Bixel Chamberlain.

The following ministers of the gospel may be counted as children of the Swiss church: S. S. Baumgartner, John Haas, Albert Schumacher, P. P. Hilty, John Hager, Elmer Basinger, Menno Niswander, David D. King, J. Raymond Schütz, John Neuenschwander, John Lauby, Alvordan Althaus, Kenneth Neuenschwander and William Augsburger. Several of these have served churches of other denominations.

There are also several missionaries now holding membership in the Swiss churches who have transferred their membership here after having gone to the foreign field, but these should be counted as children of their home congregations.

The transfer of the Swiss churches from the atmosphere of repression in their home land to a land of civil and religious liberty has had the effect of stimulating their spiritual life and giving it a freer development. Some of the severer restrictions relating to forms of dress and church discipline placed upon them by the rules of the church and accentuated by the severe persecutions to which they had been subjected have been modified or removed. The early Anabaptists had endeavored to establish a Christian fellowship based on a personal experience of salvation manifesting itself in a regenerated and Christ-centered personal life, a pure and wholesome family life and a devoted, zealous and democratic church life. However, during succeeding generations persecution had in some cases resulted in a rather formal expression of church life in a set of rules and regulations.

It is the task of the Swiss churches of today to

recover something of the spiritual fervor of the earliest Swiss brethren, to preserve their pure evangelical faith for themselves and their posterity and to make it live again as a vital transforming power in American church and community life far beyond the bounds of our own denomination. Thus they may assist the Mennonite church as a whole in fulfilling its God-given mission in our own day and generation as faithfully as did their forefathers four centuries ago.

THE CENTENARY AND THE HISTORY OF THE SWISS CHURCH

The preceding history is a part of the plan to celebrate the Centenary of the founding of the Swiss church of Putnam and Allen Counties on July 4, 1937. During the month of February a General Centenary committee of twelve was chosen by the Church Councils of the four main branches of the original Swiss church to make plans for an appropriate commemoration. This committee consists of P. A. Kliewer, D. J. Basinger and S. S. Bixel, of the Ebenezer Church; P. E. Whitmer, P. A. Amstutz and A. S. Hilty, of the Grace Church; D. J. Unruh, Hiram Kohli and Menno Schumacher, of the St. John Church; H. T. Unruh, E. J. Hirschler and D. W. Bixler, of the First Mennonite Church. The General Committee organized with E. J. Hirschler as chairman and Hiram Kohli as secretary.

Four sub-committees were appointed which organized as follows: Program Committee—P. E. Whitmer, chairman; D. J. Unruh, secretary; H. T. Unruh, P. A. Kliewer. Publicity Committee—Hiram Kohli, chairman; P. A. Amstutz, D. W. Bixler. Committee on Arrangements and Finance—S. S. Bixel, chairman; Irwin Basinger, Gilbert Suter, Ezra Moser. A Historical Committee—Adam S. Hilty, chairman; Menno Schumacher and D. J. Basinger.

The Historical Committee gathered old church records and other documents for a history of the congregation. At the second meeting of the General Committee E. J. Hirschler was requested to write this history. The author gathered further data found in the library of Bluffton College and interviewed some persons to secure specific information concerning certain facts and dates of events. The

writer also wishes to acknowledge the help of Dr. C. H. Smith of Bluffton College in directing him to certain sources of information. The ministers of the four cooperating churches have rendered invaluable aid in securing data concerning their respective churches. The assistant editor, Rev. Daniel J. Unruh, aided by the other ministers and the Historical Committee has collected pictures and cuts for this booklet. These illustrations add materially to its usefulness and attractiveness. Recognition is due the Historical Committee and the General Committee for verifying the accuracy of the statements in this account at various committee meetings. To all those who have assisted in any way by their interest and encouragement and by supplying facts or making helpful suggestions the author and the Historical Committee wish to express their heartfelt thanks.

May this story help the present membership of the Swiss churches to appreciate more fully the splendid heritage bequeathed to us by our Mennonite forefathers.

E. J. HIRSCHLER
Centenary Historian

CENTENARY HISTORIAN E. J. HIRSCHLER



E. J. Hirschler Professor of Mathematics at Bluffton College
has served the Swiss Church as Secretary and the First
Mennonite Church as Deacon and as Sunday
School Superintendent.

The following is a List of Sources of Material
for this History:

- I Records of the Swiss Congregation:
 - (a) The first Record begun by Elder Christian Suter in 1853, later continued by Elder John Moser until 1886.
 - (b) A Record begun by Abraham Zurflüh, the first secretary, in 1893 and continued by him until 1903.
 - (c) A later Record begun in 1908 and continued until 1918.
- II Records of the four branches of the Swiss church: Grace Mennonite of Pandora, First Mennonite of Bluffton, St. John Mennonite near Pandora, Ebenezer Mennonite west of Bluffton.
- III "Gründung und Fortgang unserer Gemeinde", a manuscript in which some of the older settlers wrote down the early history of the Swiss church before 1876. Found among the writings left by Elder Peter Schumacher. Loaned by Mendelssohn Amstutz.
- IV Die Taufgesinnten Gemeinden. Samuel Geiser of Tavannes, Switzerland. Karlsruhe. 1931.
- V An address by Samuel Geiser on "The Swiss and French Mennonites" given at the World Conference of Mennonites held at Amsterdam, Holland, July 1936. English Translation in the Mennonite Quarterly Review of January 1937.
- VI Geschichte der Bernischen Taeufer. Ernst Müller, Frauenfeld 1895.
- VII "Unsere Mennoniten Gemeinde." Bundesbote of January 5, 1899. J. S. Amstutz.

- VIII "Aus dem Leben der Schweizer Mennoniten." Bundesbote, August 1, August 15, and September 1, 1885. A. J. Moser.
- IX Geschichtliche Ereignisse der Schweizer Mennoniten Ansiedlung. P. B. Amstutz, Bluffton, Ohio, 1925.
- X Our Mennonite Settlement. Bluffton News, February 16, 1922. Abraham Zurflüh.
- XI "Die Schweizer Gemeinden in Amerika." Address given by S. F. Sprunger at the Golden Jubilee of the General Conference held at Beatrice, Neb., September 1908.
- XII Das Schweizerische Taeufer Mennontentum. Ernst Correll. Tübingen 1925.
- XIII Histories of the Mennonites by Smith, Cassel, Hartzler and Kaufman.
- XIV "Eine Skizze der Sonnenberg Mennoniten Gemeinde bei Dalton, Ohio." Bundesbote. March 9, 1899. Peter Schneck.
- XV A biography of Elder Christian Steiner by the late Prof. P. D. Amstutz of Pandora.
- XVI A brief History of the Swiss Settlement containing quotations from the diary of the first settler, Michael Neuenschwander, also by Prof. P. D. Amstutz.
- XVII Brief history of the Defenseless Mennonite Church of Bluffton, Ohio. Compiled by Clarence D. Diller, secretary.
- XVIII Personal interviews arranged for by the Historical Committee and the ministers of the cooperating churches or by the author of the above history, Prof. E. J. Hirschler.

- XIX Bundesbote Kalender and Mennonite Yearbook
for the years 1885-1936.
- XX A history of the General Conference of the
Mennonite Church of North America. H. P.
Krehbiel.
- XXI Files of the Bundesbote and of the Bluffton
News.

This history has been published by the following
committee:

E. J. Hirschler, Editor
D. J. Unruh, Assistant Editor
P. E. Whitmer, Business Manager

PROGRAM

Of the Centenary of the founding of the Swiss
Mennonite Church of Putnam and Allen
Counties in Ohio.

Sunday, July 4, 1937

— at —

Bluffton High School Auditorium, Bluffton, Ohio

MORNING SERVICE, 9:45 A. M. - 11:45 A. M.
WORSHIP SERVICE

REV. PAUL E. WHITMER, Presiding

Invocation	Rev. Paul E. Whitmer
Hymn by the Congregation . . .	"How Firm a Foundation"
Scripture Lesson	Rev. P. A. Kliewer
Special Music—"I Waited for the Lord" . . .	F. Mendelssohn
	Women's Chorus
Prayer	Rev. A. S. Rosenberger
	President of Bluffton College
Offering	
Special Music—"He Surely Hath Borne Our Griefs"	
	Antonia Lotti
	Women's Chorus
Sermon—"Retrospect and Prospect" . . .	Rev. W. S. Gottshall
	Quakertown, Pennsylvania
Special Music—"O Lord Most Holy" . . .	F. Marchetti
	Women's Chorus
Address—"One Hundred Years of Adventure for Christ"	
	Mr. Elmer Baumgartner
	Berne, Indiana
Hymn by the Congregation	"Faith of Our Fathers"
Announcements	

Benediction. *Rev. Jacob Haas*

Women's Chorus is comprised of representative
women of the co-operating churches.

Miss Hilda Amstutz, Directress

Miss Ruth Bixel, Accompanist

AFTERNOON SERVICE, 2:30 P. M. - 4:30 P. M.

HISTORICAL SERVICE

MR. HIRAM KOHLI, Presiding

Invocation . . . Rev. C. H. A. Van der Smissen
Newton, Kansas

Hymn by Congregation . "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"

Scripture Lesson Rev. H. T. Unruh

Special Music—Harre meine Seele . . Men's Chorus

Prayer Rev. S. K. Mosiman, D. D.
Bluffton, Ohio

Special Music—Now Let Every Tongue Adore Thee
Men's Chorus

Address—Historical Sidelights . . Prof. E. J. Hirschler,
Centenary Historian, Bluffton, Ohio

Brief Responses by . . "Native Sons in Christian Service"

Special Music—The Lost Chord . . Men's Chorus

Address—"Then and Now" . . Prof. J. Raymond Schutz,
Manchester College, N. Manchester, Indiana

Hymn by Congregation . "All Hail the Pow'r of Jesus' Name"

Announcements and Offering

Benediction. *Rev. John J. Esau*

Men's Chorus is comprised of the men of the co-operating
churches, and members of the Swiss Male Chorus.

Director—Mr. Alvin Burkholder, Findlay, Ohio

Pianist—Mrs. Odulla Lugibill Armbrecht, Findlay, Ohio

EVENING SERVICE, 7:45 P. M.

MUSICAL SERVICE

MR. D. W. BIXLER, Presiding

Invocation Rev. Daniel J. Unruh

Announcements and Offering

Oratorio—"The Holy City" . . . By A. R. Gaul

Combined Choirs of the four co-operating churches
with orchestra accompaniment

Director Prof. G. A. Lehman

Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, Rochester, N. Y.

Pianist Miss Ruth Bixel
Pandora, Ohio

Director of Orchestra . . Prof. Sidney Hauenstein
Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio

SOLOISTS

Soprano . . . Lucille Hilty

Alto . . . Hilda Amstutz

Tenor . . . Gordon Hilty

Bass . . . Alvin Burkholder

Benediction. *Rev. D. J. Unruh*

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